

Acting like climate change really is an emergency

The Toronto Star

June 28, 2019 Friday

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Section: OPINION; Pg. A13

Length: 726 words

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Body

As the Canadian Parliament declared a national climate emergency last week, Greenpeace activists in the U.K. were showing the world what it looks like when you actually consider climate change to be an emergency.

In a 12-day cat-and-mouse battle at sea, activists boarded a BP drilling rig heading to the North Sea multiple times and blocked its path with the Greenpeace ship Arctic Sunrise. Media reported that oil executives held "crisis talks" because "insiders fear the protest could also damage the industry's reputation and frighten off investors already concerned by growing worldwide climate activism."

Greenpeace told BP that if it isn't willing to end drilling new wells and switch to investing only in renewable energy, "it should wind down its operations, return cash to investors and go out of business."

Oil executives and their backers within the Canadian political establishment feel that this kind of protest is going too far. They would have a stronger case if we had started taking serious, sustained action on climate change in the 1980s, when scientists and activists first put climate change on the political agenda. Instead, oil and coal companies ran multimillion-dollar, decades-long campaigns to cast doubt on the science and delay action that would reduce demand for what they sell.

Now, it is too late for business or politics as usual.

The Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that we must cut carbon pollution in half in the next 11 years to avoid catastrophic consequences. This would, in IPCC's words, "require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society," but provide "clear benefits to people and natural ecosystems."

The Liberal government referenced the IPCC when it put forward the climate emergency motion on May 14. Yet it then waited a month to bring the emergency motion to a vote.

A cynic might say that the Liberals delayed the vote to embarrass the Conservatives, by forcing them to vote against the declaration immediately before unveiling their own climate plan. The Conservatives returned the favour in releasing their plan, which happens to mirror the electoral platform published by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, the day after the Trans Mountain pipeline deadline.

The result: a bizarre juxtaposition where the Trudeau government declared a national climate emergency one day and approved a pipeline that would dramatically expand oil production and greenhouse gas emissions the next.

This kind of "cleverness" will doom us all.

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Scientists have pulled the fire alarm because the building is on fire. Conservatives assure us that isn't really smoke that we're choking on, while Liberals encourage us to finish up our work before heading for the exits.

Meanwhile, the youth climate strikers flood the streets searching for fire hoses.

So what would it mean to act like climate change really is a crisis?

First, we'd stop building fossil fuel mega-projects.

We won't stop using oil or gas tomorrow, but new energy investments would be restricted to improving energy efficiency and expanding renewable energy.

The alternative is not only more expensive - it comes with devastating, painful losses of lives, homes, livelihoods and species.

To smooth this bumpy ride, we need to plan for a just transition. More than swapping one kind of energy technology for another, we need a green new deal. Across Canada, there have been more than 200 town halls involving thousands of people discussing what a green new deal might look like.

The good news is that addressing the climate emergency will put a lot of people to work building great public transit systems, better buildings, more resilient farms and lots of wind, solar and geothermal power generators. It also means more equitable sharing of resources and wealth, better working conditions, a job guarantee for every affected worker and authentic reconciliation with, and leadership from, Indigenous peoples.

In the meantime, we need to recognize that climate leadership isn't buying and building a pipeline, or drilling for oil in the North Sea. It's about making an honest assessment of the scale of the climate crisis and implementing solutions at a scale and pace matching that crisis.

Treating an emergency ... like an emergency.

Christy Ferguson is executive director of Greenpeace Canada.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: CLIMATE ACTION (90%); CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); CLIMATOLOGY (90%); ENVIRONMENTAL & WILDLIFE ORGANIZATIONS (90%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (90%); PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (90%); REPORTS, REVIEWS & SECTIONS (79%); DELAYS & POSTPONEMENTS (78%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS (78%); EMISSIONS (78%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (78%); GREEN FINANCE (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); LIBERALISM (78%); POLITICS (78%); POLLUTION & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS (78%); TALKS & MEETINGS (78%); OFFSHORE OIL & GAS EXPLORATION & EXTRACTION (77%); POLLUTION (77%); SALTWATER ECOSYSTEMS (77%); BUSINESS CLOSINGS (76%); RENEWABLE ENERGY INDUSTRY (75%); CLIMATE CHANGE REGULATION & POLICY (73%); GREENHOUSE GASES (73%); PLATFORMS & ISSUES (71%); AWARDS & PRIZES (69%); AIR POLLUTION (66%); NOBEL PRIZES (64%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (59%)

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Organization: GREENPEACE INTERNATIONAL (93%)

Industry: OIL & GAS INDUSTRY (89%); EMISSIONS (78%); ENERGY & UTILITIES (78%); GREEN FINANCE (78%); OFFSHORE OIL & GAS EXPLORATION & EXTRACTION (77%); OIL EXTRACTION (77%); PETROLEUM PRODUCTS (77%); RENEWABLE ENERGY INDUSTRY (75%); ALTERNATIVE & RENEWABLE ENERGY (69%); COAL INDUSTRY (51%)

Geographic: ATLANTIC OCEAN (79%); NORTH SEA (79%); CANADA (93%); UNITED KINGDOM (79%)

Load-Date: June 28, 2019

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